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Statement submitted by World Youth Alliance, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

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Statement

Critical issues facing women and girls, and, by extension their families, communities, regions and the world, are outlined below. We must redouble our efforts to demonstrate in practical terms the respect we have for the dignity of each person, by working to protect and support women in the unique difficulties they face around the world.

Health

A significant health risk women in developing countries face is death due to complications from childbirth. According to the World Health Organization, the vast majority of these deaths are preventable. Mothers, as caretakers, educators and providers, are often at the centre of their communities. A mother dying in childbirth increases the baby's rate of morbidity and mortality. Motherless children are at much greater risk of death than those with living parents, owing to loss of income and care. Motherless children are also much less likely to receive complete schooling and adequate nutrition. When a mother dies, children tend to enter the workforce at a young age, leading to health and social problems. Maternal death also has an immediate, direct economic impact on families.

The Beijing Platform for Action called for the reduction of maternal mortality by 50 per cent by 2000 and another half by 2015; unfortunately, these goals will not be met. Maternal deaths were reduced by almost 50 per cent between 1990 and 2013. However, numbers held between 2010 (287,000) and 2013 (289,000). The maternal mortality rate in developing countries is still too high, at 230 per 100,000 live births, compared to 16 in developed regions. There are success stories, from reports of zero maternal deaths in rural villages in Tanzania to Chile's achievement of the lowest maternal mortality ratio in Latin America, thanks to a combination of economic growth, compulsory education laws, free maternal and child health care, and improvements in sanitation and nutrition.

The direct interventions needed to help every woman and baby safely through pregnancy and childbirth are clear, and attainable for developing countries:

(a) At least four prenatal care visits, as recommended by the World Health Organization;

(b) Access to skilled birth attendants who, with back-up emergency obstetric care, can reduce the maternal mortality rate by 75 per cent, according to the United Nations Population Fund, because they are trained to monitor pregnancy and childbirth, recognise and manage problems, and refer to higher levels when necessary;

(c) Minimally equipped birthing facilities that contain the essential medicines and equipment to treat and deal with the major complications of pregnancy;

(d) Health-care delivery system infrastructure, including education, which empowers women to make appropriate health decisions, and transportation, which enables women to reach birthing facilities in time.

As the global health community increases its focus on promoting contraception and legal abortion as "necessary" measures in combating maternal

mortality, the emphasis on these four achievable and effective interventions has declined. Funding and policy efforts have prioritised contraception and abortion, which fail to address the needs of pregnant women to have safe and healthy pregnancies and deliveries. A medical care system that cannot provide the four simple interventions listed above will be unable to provide appropriate medical counselling or safe surgery of any kind.

Demographic and health surveys conducted in developing countries reveal many women cannot determine when they are fertile; this ability is critical for avoiding unintended pregnancies and planning desired pregnancies. The surveys also indicate that women who use contraceptives or have been sterilised are not informed about potential side effects, what to do if they experience side effects, or about other methods of contraception. Women cannot exercise the informed choice required in family planning if they do not have this information. Further, the focus of unmet needs for family planning ignores the reasons why many women do not want to use contraceptives, including health concerns, side effects, and personal, religious or ethical beliefs.

To enjoy reproductive health and realise their right to freely and responsibly determine the number and spacing of their children, women need education that equips them to know their bodies. By understanding her cycle and how to observe and understand her own biomarkers, a woman is able to achieve optimum health and plan her family. She can become an active participant in her health care and can work with her care provider to achieve long-term health outcomes. Moreover, development programs will always be more effective if they arise from the communities themselves, and reflect local values and priorities, rather than having priorities imposed from afar.

Female foeticide

An important and under examined area in the promotion of women's rights is the protection of girls prior to birth. In some cultures, female sex selection is a reason to abort baby girls, due to family and cultural preferences for boys. This represents the most aggressive form of discrimination against women and girls present in the world today. Disturbingly, new research indicates that mothers and grandmothers often drive the preference for males; certainly they are participants in the decision to abort baby girls before birth, or abandon them afterwards, sometimes including infanticide. The numbers of missing baby girls are not insignificant; conservative estimates indicate that over 100 million baby girls are now missing from Asia, and these numbers are rising in other parts of the world as well. Such systemic, widespread violence against girls needs to be addressed at a global level in order to find solutions to make sure that girls are welcomed in every family and treated with the respect that the gift of their lives, talents and joy deserves.

Human and sexual trafficking

Particular attention should also be given to girls who are trafficked into intolerable work conditions, or sexual slavery. This is also done through the manipulation of families who love their girls, and who are ready to sacrifice in order to send them to cities and other countries for education and work experience. These families are cruelly deceived. Efforts must be made to courageously shut down trafficking rings wherever they are identified. This includes working to stigmatise

and punish individuals from western countries involved in the transportation, sale, and solicitation of services that these trafficking rings provide.

Women and development

The first strategic objectives of the Beijing Platform for Action relate to women and poverty. As we approach not only Beijing+20 but also the Sustainable Development Goals post-2015 agenda, it is important to note the interrelation between poverty and other aspects of life where women typically are disadvantaged. Promoting female education provides one of the best ways of combating systems and practices that limit women and girls' ability to participate fully in their societies.

Poverty, undernourishment and unemployment are the main factors that prevent girls from finishing primary and secondary school. Lack of stability in some countries may force girls and women to either work or marry early. Cultural norms that see women and girls as a burden, educated and fed only to be given to another family through marriage, may also contribute to the difficulties girls face in securing the nutrition, education, and investment in skills needed to flourish. By improving the situation of girls living in poverty, deprived of nutrition, water and sanitation facilities, with no access to basic health care services, shelter, education, participation and protection, the dropout rates will be reduced. By eliminating school abandonment, girls will be empowered.

Educating boys and girls about equality and intrinsic dignity is necessary to lower girls' dropout rates and facilitate their participation in secondary and tertiary education. Respect for women's and girls' right to education starts at the earliest stages of life. Education to understand the intrinsic value of both women and men and to promote equal sharing of responsibilities should be encouraged. This education should focus on the inherent value of caregiving and other responsibilities, typically undertaken by women and girls, that promote human flourishing, interconnectedness, and form the basis for building strong families at the heart of society.

Conclusion

Humanity is its own greatest resource, but only when it involves all its members. Every person, woman or man, deserves a voice and to be respected. Each woman has unique qualities and gifts which can only be fully appreciated, fostered and utilized where human dignity is respected. By recognising women's innate dignity as human persons, we can empower women who will then transform their communities. The Beijing Platform for Action can only achieve its objectives by grounding its actions in understanding that human dignity is the basis for all true equality.